

Church of the Redeemer
(Universalist Church)
Commercial Street
Provincetown
Barnstable County
Massachusetts

HABS No. MA-737

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D. C. 20240

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER
(First Universalist Church)

HABS No. MA-737

Location: 236 Commercial Street, Provincetown,
Barnstable County, Massachusetts.

Owner: First Universalist Parish.
236 Commercial Street, Provincetown.

Architectural
Significance: This wooden Greek Revival Church with notably fine
three stage tower is remarkable for the illusionistic
architectural detailing in fresco of its auditorium
interior.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1847.

B. Significance:

The First Universalist Church is the second home of the Universalist parish founded in Provincetown in 1829. The church was begun in 1847 and, according to local sources, is the oldest building on the Lower Cape still in its original state and being used for its original purpose. The most significant features of the church are its elaborate three-stage tower, often (though incorrectly) called the "Christopher Wren Tower," and the trompe d'oeil paintings which decorate its ceilings and walls.

The Universalist Church was built by ship's carpenters under the supervision of Benjamin Hallet of Barnstable. The immediate model for the building, with the exception of the tower, was a small church constructed in Fall River, Massachusetts, in 1845. Only the entrance and auditorium of the Provincetown Church were finished in 1847; the remaining sections of the building were not completed until the 1860s.

The trompe d'oeil paintings of the auditorium are the work of a young German artist, Carl Wendte. Born in Verden, Hanover, in 1820, Wendte studied art in Sienna, Italy, and became expert in the use of fresco and tempera. In 1841, Wendte and his wife came to America and settled in Boston. The painter's reputation gradually grew and his murals appeared in a number of New England churches. Wendte's work in the Universalist Church was done in egg tempera and shows the influence of his study of Italian churches. After leaving Provincetown, Wendte accepted a commission for a church in Boston; while working there he was stricken with pneumonia and died in 1848, at the age of 28.

The tracker organ, which was installed in the First Universalist Church in 1850, is the oldest on Cape Cod. Its carved wooden pilasters framing the organ pipes are copies of the pilasters which appear in Wendte's murals. The original chandelier still hangs in the church and has globes, fonts and prisms of Sandwich Glass.

1. Bibliography:

Barrie, Steve. A History of the First Universalist Church of Provincetown, Provincetown, 1971.

Smith, Simeon C., Leaves From an Old Church Record Book, Boston, Universalist Publishing House, 1922.

Prepared by: Anne R. Wardwell
Survey Director
Massachusetts Historical
Commission
August 27, 1971

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This rectangular clapboarded frame gable roofed Greek Revival church is surmounted by a particularly handsome tower. The plaster walls and ceiling of the auditorium are completely frescoed in trompe d'oeil architecture.
2. Condition of fabric: Good.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: 70' x 56".
2. Layout, shape: Rectangular.
3. Foundations: Brick.
4. Wall construction, finish and color: Clapboards, painted white.
5. Structural system, framing: Wooden timber.
6. Porches, stoops and bulkheads. None.
7. Chimneys: One, on rear gable end.
8. Openings: See photographs.

Interior wooden shutters in church.

9. Roof, shape, covering:

- a. Shape, covering: Gable roof, composition shingles.
- b. Cornice, eaves: Boxed cornice.
- c. Dormers, cupolas: One tower with three levels.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. Ground floor: A vestibule containing paired staircases leads to a large meeting room with nine pillars supporting the auditorium floor. Beyond are a kitchen at the right, a small furnace room, and a study in the left hand corner.
- b. Main floor: The main floor contains the stair hall and sanctuary. A small staircase to the organ loft and tower is in the left-hand front corner of the stairhall, or narthex.

2. Flooring: Wooden.

3. Stairways: There are paired stairways to the second floor, and a stair to the choir loft and tower.

4. Wall and ceiling finish: Plaster downstairs. Second floor plaster is painted with decorative designs. See photographs.

5. Chimney: On the rear gable end.

6. Lighting: Converted oil lamps downstairs. Electrified whale oil lamps are used in the church in the large chandeliers. There are modern wall brackets.

7. Heating: Central hot air system by oil.

Site:

Entrance faces south. Building is located on north side of lot.

Walks, driveways. One concrete entrance walk.

Landscaping, gardens, etc. There is a lawn in front of the building with three maples, two elms, one chestnut and two blue spruce trees.

Prepared by: Joseph Achilo
Historian
National Park Service
Cape Cod Project
Summer 1959